

# *Awakening to World Languages:* **INTERCULTURAL AWARENESS IN VERY YOUNG LEARNERS**

**By Erin Kearney and So-Yeon Ahn**

In a non-immersion, preschool world language program, what learning outcomes are reasonable to expect? Since exposure to and engagement with new languages is typically limited in these so-called “low-input” (Pinter, 2011, p. 86) programs, we should anticipate no more than modest gains in linguistic proficiency (Nikolov & Mihaljevi Djigunovi , 2011). Rather, early childhood language programs can, and often do, focus on fostering positive attitudes toward languages, language learning and speakers of other languages and on laying the groundwork for subsequent language study. Another plausible objective in such early

language learning programs can be establishing foundations for development of intercultural communicative competence. However, what development of intercultural competence looks like and how it is achieved through teaching and learning interactions, especially with preschool-aged learners, remains unclear. As Nikolov and Mihaljevi Djigunovi (2006) note, despite the growing popularity of early language learning programs around the world, “very little research has been published” (p. 243), especially observational studies that closely examine classroom practices. None specifically explores development of intercultural competence in early childhood, although

some studies that examine development of awareness of linguistic diversity in young learners (Dagenais et al., 2008, 2009; Young & Helot, 2003) are instructive.

The program we describe below and the excerpts we share from classroom interactions that occurred in several preschools in Buffalo, New York begin to illustrate what it means for very young children to build the foundations for intercultural competence through their experiences with new languages, namely through processes of awareness-raising. We review Byram’s (1997) concept of intercultural communicative competence with special attention to the role of awareness in his model and then turn



Counting cotton ball “snowballs” in Spanish with a language partner from Barcelona

to some of our data to make clearer what we can expect in terms of developing intercultural competence among the youngest of school-going language learners.

### EVOLUTION OF THE PROGRAM

The “Awakening to World Languages” program was born in the fall of 2010 with a phone call from a parent whose child was enrolled in a local Head Start center. This mother, head of the parent committee, intent on obtaining a high-quality and stimulating education not only for her own child but for all of the other children enrolled in Head Start classrooms in Buffalo, proposed that the university and a Head Start chapter work together to begin providing language instruction in several preschool classrooms. After several months of planning and preparation, the program was launched in spring of 2011, and the first set of “language partners” (graduate students enrolled in language teacher preparation programs at the local university) began to visit six different Head Start classrooms twice a week for two to three hours each visit to integrate language instruction in Chinese, Korean and Spanish. Initially, language partners

were encouraged to focus on word- and phrase-learning, teaching language through games and spontaneous play, and singing songs with the children. Language partners prepared short group lessons to be implemented while children were gathered together on a rug during circle time, but they also prepared games and activities to be used as children played individually or in small groups at the centers set up around each of the preschool classrooms and were encouraged to carry out spontaneous instruction that followed the children’s interests and attention. By all accounts and through our observational research, it was clear, in the first year of the program, that the young children in these classrooms responded enthusiastically to their language partners and were clearly capable of retaining words and some communicative chunks (even though the language partners’ visits were infrequent).

Nonetheless, we began to speculate with each passing semester about how the program could aim to instill even deeper competences or competencies. We knew that once children left the preschool setting, they would likely enter elementary schools that did not continue their Chinese, Korean or Spanish learning, a reality that refocused our attention even more acutely on goals other than cultivation of linguistic proficiency. As a result we turned to notions of intercultural communicative competence and language awareness and refined the goals of the program so that some basic linguistic proficiency, but more, centrally language awareness and intercultural competence, became central objectives. In addition to reading theory and research on these topics, we explored some existing language awareness curricula and descriptions of projects to see what we might adapt for our younger learners (e.g. Dagenais et al., 2008; Maraillet & Armand, 2006; [www.elodil.com](http://www.elodil.com)).

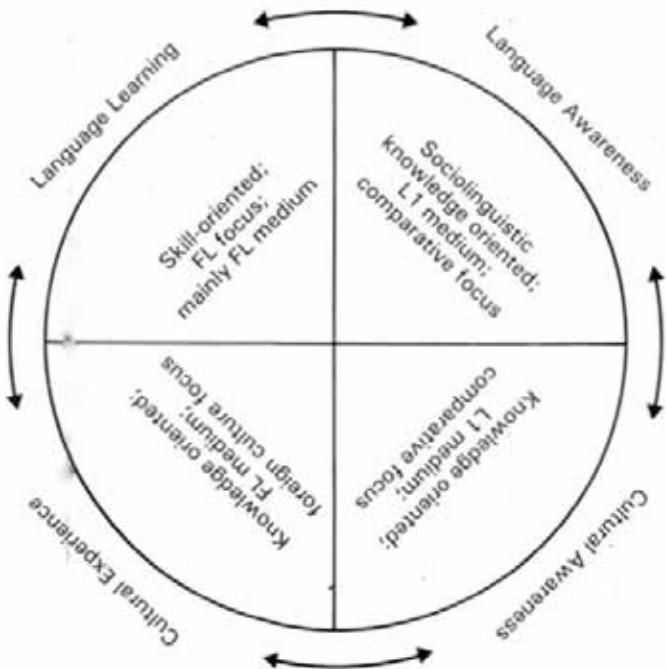
As of spring 2013, a language awareness curriculum is being piloted in one preschool classroom. The curriculum, like other language awareness approaches, involves exploration of linguistic and cultural diversity (of classroom, local and global communities) and

development of a range of awarenesses alongside the learning of linguistic forms. Donmall (1985) defines language awareness as a “sensitivity to and conscious awareness of the nature of language and its role in human life” (p. 7). So as children in the “Awakening to World Languages” program learn greetings in Spanish, for example, their attention is also drawn to the idea that these particular phrases are used with people who speak Spanish. This may seem, upon initial consideration, to be an obvious linking of linguistic form (certain phrases), social function (informal and formal greetings), and social group (Spanish speakers); yet, if a child has never encountered another language before, such a mapping of linguistic form to a

**FIGURE 1: BYRAM’S MULTI-DIMENSIONAL VIEW OF INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE**

	Skills interpret and relate ( <i>savoir comprendre</i> )	
Knowledge of self and other; of interaction: individual and societal ( <i>savoirs</i> )	Education political education critical cultural awareness ( <i>savoir s’engager</i> )	Attitudes relativising self valuing other ( <i>savoir être</i> )
	Skills discover and/or interact ( <i>savoir apprendre/faire</i> )	

**FIGURE 2**



Byram (1991, p. 20): “The language and culture teaching process”

particular group of people can be a potentially profound realization.

Borg (1994) explains that a language awareness approach in language teaching “attempts to develop learners’ explicit understanding of language as well as an awareness of their own learning by involving them in discovery-oriented tasks which are both affectively and cognitively motivating” (p. 62). Inquiry can extend well beyond awareness of language forms to include broader linguistic diversity. Indeed, it was with an eye to raising awareness and fostering

positive orientations toward increasing local linguistic diversity, that language awareness approaches first came into use in England in the 1980s (Hawkins, 1984). To give a specific example, in our program, engaging students in a survey of the languages represented in their classroom and community is one means through which the language awareness curriculum aims to raise learners' and teachers' awareness of local linguistic diversity. Another way in which our revised program attempts to create opportunities for raising awareness of linguistic diversity, is by sending two, rather than one, language partner to each classroom. Currently, a Chinese-speaking and a Spanish-speaking language partner both attend their assigned preschool classroom on the same days so that the children get simultaneous access to more than one new language and, in the process, also gain a sense of the natural co-existence of multiple languages and cultures in a diverse society. On many occasions, we have seen language partners naturally modeling for children ways in which one can compare languages and discover new meanings as they too engage in awakening to new languages.

In shifting the program toward language awareness and intercultural competence goals, it was clear that more support was needed for the language partners. As a result, we established a weekly seminar, during which the language partners develop their own understanding of what language awareness and intercultural competence are and share ideas of how these might be achieved instructionally in their classroom settings and for the young children with whom they work. This dialogue and collaborative planning in the seminar setting has brought coherence and focus to instruction, the curriculum, and the program as a whole. Additionally, it has been essential to the functioning of the program to remain in constant conversation with classroom teachers already working in the preschool classrooms and for the language partners to coordinate with them as much as possible. We also communicate regularly with parents about the program and have invited them to engage in dialogue with us about their children's experiences with language learning and their ideas for further developing the emerging curriculum.

#### **Awareness: The Foundation of Intercultural Communicative Competence**

We focus on awareness in our program for two reasons: (1) awareness is a crucial element in developing intercultural commu-

nicate competence, as Byram (1991, 1997, 2012) has consistently theorized over the years, and (2) since learners in the "Awakening to World Languages" program are so young (three- to five-years-old) and just at the start of the language learning process, awareness-raising is the most foundational building block in developing their intercultural communicative competence.

Byram (1997) defines intercultural communicative competence as "more than the exchange of information and the sending of messages" (p. 3). Rather, it is communication "focused on establishing and maintaining relationships,...a willingness to relate" (p. 3) across potential differences. See Figure 1 for how Byram (1997, p. 34) represents his multi-dimensional view of this competence.

The ultimate goal in developing intercultural communicative competence (what Byram calls "critical cultural awareness") is for a person to be aware of a range of linguistic and cultural resources in communication and to be able to see them in relative terms (*savoir s'engager* or knowing how to engage). Furthermore, an interculturally competent person can leverage this sense of relativity of meaning to interact and communicate with others in situations of difference.

In early stages of language and culture learning, especially with very young learners, certain among these types of *savoirs* (knowledges) are most relevant. Byram (2008) himself outlines those elements that are particularly worthy of pursuing when working with children: "Savoir-être, the attitude of openness and curiosity, may be more easily encouraged in primary school than later because children in the earliest years of primary education have not yet fully absorbed the assumptions of their own cultural environment, and do not yet perceive the cultural as natural" (p. 82). He then goes on to say that young learners are also able to collect and compare knowledge about the products and practices in their own and other-language cultures (relating to the *savoirs* dimension of the model) and that they are at this age quite engaged in learning how to learn, which corresponds to the *savoir-apprendre* (knowing how to learn) dimension of his overall model.

Byram is careful to remind us that ultimate attainment of intercultural communicative competence is not possible in early stages but rather that the foundations for competence are being built. Byram is also writing about elementary school aged children, whereas our own project brings lan-

guage learning to even younger students. Nonetheless, our data suggest that the dimensions he emphasizes are also relevant to younger students' learning.

In some of his earlier work, Byram (1991) offers a model (see Figure 2) of the constant movement between direct experience with language and culture and awareness-raising in relation to language and culture that constitutes development of intercultural communicative competence.

What is particularly notable in this early theorization of the way both language awareness and cultural awareness develop is their fundamental interdependence with direct experience of language and culture. This formulation suggests that in a program such as ours, direct experience using a new language and using it in ways that connect learners with culture provide opportunities for reflection on experience. This reflection on experience can involve information-building and/or comparison of what in the language and cultural experience is new to children with what is more familiar. Also of note in Byram's theory of the way awareness develops is the inclusion of both first language and target-language use. While immersion approaches may allow for much more consistent and rich direct experience of a new language, usually leading to fairly high levels of linguistic proficiency, a program model like ours, which has goals of intercultural communicative competence, can productively alternate between first language and the target language in pursuing its goals.

#### **Some Examples: Early Processes in Building Awareness**

With an understanding of intercultural communicative competence and its strong emphasis on awareness in place, we present data excerpts from classroom interactions that occurred in our program in order to illustrate what processes represent the very first building blocks of intercultural communicative competence. We share excerpts from a Spanish-learning classroom and from a Chinese-learning classroom. In both cases, the language partner was working with three- to four-year-old children.

In the transcript of an interaction that occurred early on in Megan's (all study participants are referred to by pseudonym) visits to her assigned classroom, we see her introducing the children to her friend Dora, a paper bag puppet Megan had made using a print-out of the television show character that some of the children had confirmed knowing about and having interest in.



### *Megan introducing Dora to the children*

## **EXAMPLE 1: INTRODUCING DORA TO THE CHILDREN**

After getting to know the children in her classroom, Megan decided to use the Dora puppet as a kind of embodiment of a target-

language speaker. In doing so, she was able to instill in learners the awareness that certain languages are used with certain people. Indeed, the students in Megan's class did come to address Dora in Spanish, recognizing her as a Spanish speaker, distinct from other members of their classroom community, even Megan, the language partner, whom they came to address in both English and Spanish. It may again appear trivial, on first consideration, that the children addressed the paper bag puppet in Spanish; it bears repeating however, that such acts were indicators of the growing awareness in the children that various options exist (i.e. many different languages) for engaging with people in the world.

Several examples from another classroom illustrate, in a different way, the basic, but crucial, awareness-raising processes that occurs through the “Awakening to World Languages” program. In the three following excerpts from a classroom where Lili taught Chinese, we see another means through which children engaged with the idea of what language is. (In the transcripts below, when participants speak in a language other than English, a translation of their utterances appears in italics directly below that line of speech).

## **EXAMPLE 2: HI CHINESE**

01 Ms. Jill: ((to students)) no honey her name – ((to researcher)) they always  
02 call her Chinese

03 Ms. Kara: I know

04 Student 1: hi Chinese

05 Student 2: 你好

06 hello

07 Lili: 你好 ((waves her hand))

08 hello

09 Students: 你好

10 hello

11 Lili: 你好 ((waves her hand))

12 hello

### **EXAMPLE 3: HIS NAME IS CHINESE**



A Chinese language partner and her class

01 Ms. Kara: go sit over there in [student name]'s spot  
02 Student 3: his name is Chinese  
03 Ms. Kara: ((to a male student)) that way he, she will talk to you  
04 Student 3: his name is Chinese  
05 Ms. Jill: [student's name]  
06 Lili: 你好  
07 hello  
08 Students: 你好 ((one male student waves))  
09 hello

10 Lili: what's my name?  
 11 Student 5: Lili  
 12 Student 6: Chinese  
 13 Student 7: Ms. Lili  
 14 Student 4: 谢谢  
 15 thank you  
 16 Student 3: Chinese

#### **EXAMPLE 4: THANK YOU, CHINESE**

01 Ms. Kara: ((female student waves at Lili)) how do we say thank you?  
 02 Students: thank you  
 03 Student 5: thank you Chinese  
 04 Lili: 谢谢  
 05 thank you  
 06 Student 5: thank you 谢谢  
 07 thank you  
 08 Student 6: 谢谢  
 09 thank you  
 10 Ms. Kara: ((giggles)) Chinese, they always  
 11 Student 5: thank you miss 谢谢  
 12 thank you  
 13 Student 6: 谢谢  
 14 thank you  
 15 Student 5: thank you  
 16 Student 7: thank you  
 17 Student 8: thank you miss Lili  
 18 Lili: yeah thank you  
 19 Student 9: thank you Lili

The three interactions in the excerpts above include several occasions in which Lili's students tried out various means for referring to her. As the Head Start teachers Ms. Kara and Ms. Jill note, and as the data illustrate, the children quite often referred to Lili as "Chinese" as if it were her name. However, the excerpts also reveal a range of other options the children used, some in English and some in Chinese, for referring to their Chinese language partner (Lili, miss Lili, miss ). Given this range of names the children used and the seeming misapplication of the name of a language ("Chinese") for the name of a person (Lili), we might well ask ourselves what type of language or cultural awareness is really being cultivated in these interactions? We claim that the very beginnings of intercultural communicative competence are cultivated through exploring what options are available for using language forms in socially and culturally situated communication. In this case, children explored linguistic forms from both English and Chinese in order to engage with their language partner. That we see the children using an array of terms can be interpreted as their gaining some awareness of which options seemed to work, which didn't, when and with whom.

The process of awareness-raising among very young language learners is likely to look simple to us as adults, since we have more established categories for thinking about what language is, what languages are available in various environments, and how languages differ from each other. For children, however, who are still developing their first language, encountering new, additional languages may prompt the realization that there are in fact many linguistic resources available for communication among people (unclear) and that languages can mean in different ways in different cultural groups. Because they are still very much in the process of developing their understanding of the linguistic and social world, young children may also develop the fundamental insight that although there are norms and conventions surrounding language use in their

familiar communities, their native languages are not inherently "normal". That is, over time and with well-planned and well-implemented language awareness programs, it is possible that the seeds of awareness, that we see in the excerpts presented above, may lead to deeply-rooted intercultural communicative competence and appreciation of linguistic diversity.

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